

Christianity: Background, Basic Beliefs, and Sacred Texts

How did Christianity begin?

Christianity traces its beginning to the miraculous birth, adult ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, known as Jesus Christ. Over 2000 years ago in Palestine (today's Israel), Jesus was born into a humble Jewish family. His mother was a young peasant woman named Mary. Christians believe that his father was the Holy Spirit of God, making Jesus both fully human and fully divine. His earliest followers came to believe that he was the Messiah, or messenger, sent by God to free God's people from slavery, sin, and death. God sent his son Jesus in human form so that people would better understand God as a caring and loving parent. Jesus lived and experienced the suffering of humans. Jesus healed the sick and told stories, or parables, and preached sermons that taught what God wanted people to do – to love God with all their hearts and love their neighbors as themselves. Jesus taught by example. By being loving and forgiving himself, Jesus taught others to be loving and forgiving - especially toward those who were considered outcasts in society. This is the central message and style of Jesus' teaching. During his adult ministry, Jesus built up a loyal following, led by his twelve disciples. But Jesus also made enemies among the religious and political leaders of his time. In the end, these powerful leaders were so threatened by Jesus' growing following that the Roman governor sentenced Jesus to death and had him crucified. The third day after Jesus' death, his followers found his tomb empty and discovered that he had been raised from the dead. Christians believe that the painful sacrifice of Jesus' life on the cross shows how much God loves God's people. Jesus paid with his life on Earth for the sins of the world. Christians believe that in raising Jesus' from the dead, God showed that Jesus' message of love and forgiveness was more powerful than death, and that believing in Jesus and following the example of his life and his teaching would lead to eternal life after death. The resurrection (rising from the dead) is the sign of God's salvation offered to all people.

After his resurrection, Jesus Christ's followers spread his message throughout the world, creating the Christian Church. Today there are about two billion Christians living all over the world.

What do Christians believe?

Christians believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God – fully human and fully divine – and that through believing in him and following his teachings they can inherit eternal life. Christians believe that Jesus died for humanity, that God raised him from the dead, and that Jesus will come again at the end of time. In addition, Christians believe in the Trinity, or the three parts of God: God the Father or Creator, God the Son (Jesus) or Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit or Sanctifier. The Holy Spirit is God's presence in the world.

The essence of Jesus' teaching comes from his summary of the Jewish law he grew up with:

Love God with all your heart, soul and mind.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Christians also seek to follow the ten commandments God gave Moses to give the Israelites:

Worship no other God but me.

Do not make images to worship.

Do not misuse the name of God.

Observe the Sabbath Day (Sunday, for Christians). Keep it Holy.

Honor and respect your father and mother.

Do not murder.

Do not commit adultery.

Do not steal.

Do not accuse anyone falsely. Do not tell lies about other people.

Do not envy other's possessions.

What are the sacred texts of Christianity?

The sacred text of Christianity is the Holy Bible. The Christian Bible has two parts: the Old Testament which is essentially the Hebrew scriptures of Jesus' time; and the New Testament which contains writings about Jesus Christ and about the early church. The four gospels (a word meaning 'good news') of the New Testament are accounts of Jesus' life and teaching, of his death and resurrection. The New Testament also contains the Acts of the Apostles, which describes the early growth of the Christian church; the letters of Paul and other important leaders in the early church; the Letter to the Hebrews; and the Book of Revelation. The New Testament teaches that salvation comes through believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in following his teachings. It teaches that salvation is a gift God extends freely through Jesus Christ to all people.

Why are there so many different kinds of Christians?

From its beginning with a tiny group of Jesus' followers, Christianity has spread all over the world. Today, it is practiced by two billion people. As with any large group, Christianity has experienced many different interpretations, disagreements and struggles for power over the centuries. These have led to the growth of many different branches of Christianity interpreting the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in different ways. There are three basic streams of Christianity: Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic.

Christianity: Sacred Spaces and Places.

Christians worship in churches. It is customary to worship on Sunday, the Sabbath, and on other special festivals and celebrations. Some people, especially monks and nuns, attend church daily. In addition, most Christians pray or worship at home through individual or family devotions.

Church services are most often led by an ordained priest or minister. Often there is also lay (non-ordained minister) leadership in a service. The services usually include participatory prayers and hymns, readings, and a sermon. For most Christians the primary service is the Holy Eucharist, also known as the Holy Communion or the Mass. The center of this service is the sharing of bread and wine, representing Christ's body and blood, which he sacrificed for God's people on earth. The model for the Holy Eucharist is the Last Supper, Jesus' last meal with his disciples. At this meal, Jesus instructed his disciples to share bread and wine together as a way of remembering him.

What do Christian churches look like?

Since Christians were often persecuted in the early days of Christianity, the first churches were simply people's homes, or any other safe gathering place, often indicated by the secret sign of a fish. Just as there are many forms of Christianity, there are many forms of churches today. However, they usually share some features in common. These features tend to date back to churches of the Middle Ages. Churches from this point on tended to be built in the shape of a cross. Common features include:

Bell tower

Nave or seating area

Altar where the gospel book and the bread and wine for the Eucharist are placed

Pulpit for sermons

Lectern holding a Bible for the readings

Choir loft or seating for the choir

Stained glass windows

Candles, incense burners

A precious cross over or on the altar

Baptismal font for baptisms (holds the water)

Churches are generally built with the best the particular community has to offer as a way of showing respect and praising God. Churches are supposed to be inspirations for worship.

Christian Festivals and Celebrations

Christian celebrations and festivals center around important dates in Jesus' life.

Advent - the 4 week season of preparation for the birth of Christ, and for the Second Coming. Often an Advent wreath is used as a focus for prayer during Advent.

Christmas - Jesus' birth - often celebrated with nativity scenes, stories, pageants recalling the story of Jesus' humble birth in a stable surrounded by animals.

Epiphany - the visit of the three wise ones to Jesus just after his birth and their subsequent spreading of the news of his birth throughout the world.

Lent - the period leading up to Easter commemorating the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert fasting and praying. A time for personal reflection and improvement through prayer, fasting, and study.

Holy Week – the last week of Jesus' life, including Palm Sunday, which celebrates his triumphal entry into Jerusalem the week before he was crucified; Maundy Thursday, a remembrance of the Last Supper with the disciples; and Good Friday, the day Jesus was crucified on a cross, which is the most recognized symbol of Christianity.

Easter - Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Eggs are a major symbol of Easter since they symbolize new life. Crosses are often covered with flowers to symbolize Jesus' victory over death.

Ascension Day - when Jesus' ascended into Heaven.

Pentecost - the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's presence in the world, to Jesus' followers in the form of a mighty wind and tongues of fire.

Saints' Days - official days, recognized by many Christians, especially Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican, celebrating people who have lived particularly holy lives and are recognized as official saints.

In addition, certain passages in an individual Christian's life are marked by celebration and special services. These include Baptism or birth into the Christian church; Confirmation, an informed commitment to membership in the church; weddings; and funerals.